

The Times Record

Case for Maine's bases compelling

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"BRAC Commission Chairman Anthony Principi has said the commission will not rubber-stamp the Pentagon. Instead, it will approach the task with fresh eyes."

U.S. Rep. Tom Allen
Democrat, District 1



On May 13th — a Friday, as luck would have it — thousands of American workers and the communities in which they live and work received devastating news from Washington. On that day, the Department of Defense released its recommendations for military base shutdowns or downsizing, and Maine facilities figured prominently on the Pentagon's hit list. The recommendations now go to the president-appointed Base Realignment and Closure Commission, which this spring and summer will review and hopefully revise the department's recommendations.

In the name of cutting costs and improving U.S. military effectiveness, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld seeks to shut down Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, which would leave more than 4,000 employees, most of them civilians, out of work. The Pentagon's proposed closing of its Defense Finance and Accounting Service site at the former Loring Air Force Base in Limestone would mean the loss of another 362 civilian jobs. The Defense Department also wants to "realign" Brunswick Naval Air Station by removing all five maritime patrol squadrons, at a cost of more than 2,400 mostly military jobs. These changes would bring enormous hardship to some of the best-trained, hardest-working and most productive workers in Maine and New Hampshire and inflict a substantial blow to the economic and social fabric of the area.

The Pentagon has been slow to produce data backing up its choices. The BRAC Commission, congressional delegations, state officials and the public all want and need to know why these bases have been targeted. Based on what we know now, the recommendations on Maine bases make little sense.

The Defense Department clearly has taken aim again at Maine and the rest of the Northeast, in favor of the West and South. If its recommendations are accepted,

Maine alone would suffer almost one-fourth of the nation's net military and civilian job losses from this round of bases closings and realignments.

For those of us who have been working nonstop to save our bases — the Maine and New Hampshire congressional delegations, Govs. Baldacci and Lynch, state and local officials, talented and tireless task forces of volunteers and experts and many others — there is now a new forum in which to make our case. BRAC Commission Chairman Anthony Principi has said the commission will not rubber-stamp the Pentagon. Instead, it will approach the task with fresh eyes.

Maine's facilities are essential to our national defense. Just the day before the Pentagon's base closing announcement, Portsmouth Naval Shipyard was presented with one of the Navy's most distinguished awards for its service since 9/11. Once again, the submarine shipyard has been recognized as the country's best, continually completing superior work under budget and ahead of schedule. National security demands we retain a valuable, unique facility like this — which cannot be reconstituted if closed — when future demand for nuclear submarines remains so unpredictable.

The Pentagon's BNAS decision is just as bizarre. The department kept the base open and acknowledged its homeland defense mission. Yet it removed the aircraft needed to accomplish that mission by proposing to transfer its

P-3 Orion aircraft to Jacksonville, Fla., several hours away from the strategically and economically vital North Atlantic sea lanes. BNAS is a fully modernized base ready to house the next-generation Multi-Mission Maritime Aircraft in its new hangar. Making the last fully operational military airfield remaining in the Northeast non-operational puts our security at risk.

As a Brunswick tenth grader, Nick Sabasteanski, wrote in a May 20 letter to The Times Record, "[W]ith the war against terrorism that we are fighting today, it makes no sense to eliminate our range across the world, let alone our own soil."

The Limestone closing is incomprehensible for another reason. The savings, if any, that would be realized by this closure are small compared with the adverse economic impact on this area, a factor that must be considered under the base closing law. Remember, this facility was located in Limestone to offset the huge losses suffered when Loring Air Force Base closed. The recommendation strikes me as particularly small-minded, a double hit from the BRAC process, dramatically unfair and unjustified.

In his letter to the editor, Nick concluded: "I only hope our congressional representatives will fight vigorously to make Donald Rumsfeld realize his folly...." Nick, you can count on it, for we agree that this is folly, and we will fight as hard as we can to make things right.